

I'm a worried local historian!

Many of us have been able to recreate a snapshot of the past by studying old documents but, sadly, these seem to be disappearing at a rate of knots!

First, documents in people's private possession. These include property deeds of all kinds, papers collected by individuals on a matter of particular local interest, and bundles of old photographs. We hear too frequently of a relative who doesn't understand their value and

who bins them or puts them on a bonfire when the elderly owner dies. Nowadays the advice is sometimes given irresponsibly that all that matters about a property's deeds is the Land Registry document, and that the bundles of old papers under it can be sorted and thrown out. But just think of the information they may contain, about the families and individuals who once lived in an area, how the land was originally farmed and developed later, and even family relationships in wills (perhaps tucked into the bundle)- so essential to family historians. A

DOCUMENTS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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friend of mine was able to work out the history of a whole village road over hundreds of years, through having had sight of local residents' deeds. Another friend was able to trace the history of a local building society, because an elderly friend had clung on to some very old yellowing newspaper cuttings which belonged to her grandfather when the society was first set up. I myself have written the history of a family's Victorian and Edwardian village shop, because someone had the wit to hand over an amazing collection of their bills from that period to the Harborough Museum.

Secondly, there's the matter of documents secreted in solicitors' and other professionals' offices. We all know the feeling of being swamped by a veritable snowstorm of papers at our workplace. The usual reaction is to prune out the old, seemingly useless ones. A similar attitude prevails when the firm changes hands, or moves premises, or closes down completely. "Let's get rid of this lot", you can hear someone say, when really he should be picking up the 'phone to ask the County Record Office, or the Museum, or even a local History Society, if documents of such and such a date about this or that are of any interest. I know Record Offices are inundated and running out of storage space, but they would not want to lose the chance of having a look and deciding how valuable the papers could be to them, or someone else.

Someone I know wrote a Ph.D. thesis on the Old Poor Law (pre 1834 laws) based on documents, including a number of barristers' briefs on various aspects of that law, through having had access to a collection now housed at Northants. CRO. This mass of papers was rescued from a solicitor's office which changed hands. I myself have handled Manor Court Records which were thrown out from another solicitor's offices. They date from the early 1700s. I weep to think of what else went out, and wasn't rescued in that case.

Thirdly, there is the case of Government offices of all kinds. With the coming of the Freedom of Information Act, officials are frightened of what they may be asked to make known to the public. So the shredders and the black bin bags are much in evidence. Again, it is terrifying to think of what may be disappearing - it's irretrievable. The same remedy should be applied; they should offer the documents first to the Record Office and let someone knowledgeable decide what is of historical importance before contemplating binning it.

We live in an age when so much information seems ephemeral! Phone calls are made when our earlier ancestors would have written (and kept) letters. Faxes and e-mails are sent, and texting done, computers are used, and modern papers and inks won't last as they did in the past, so the conservators say. The manor court books

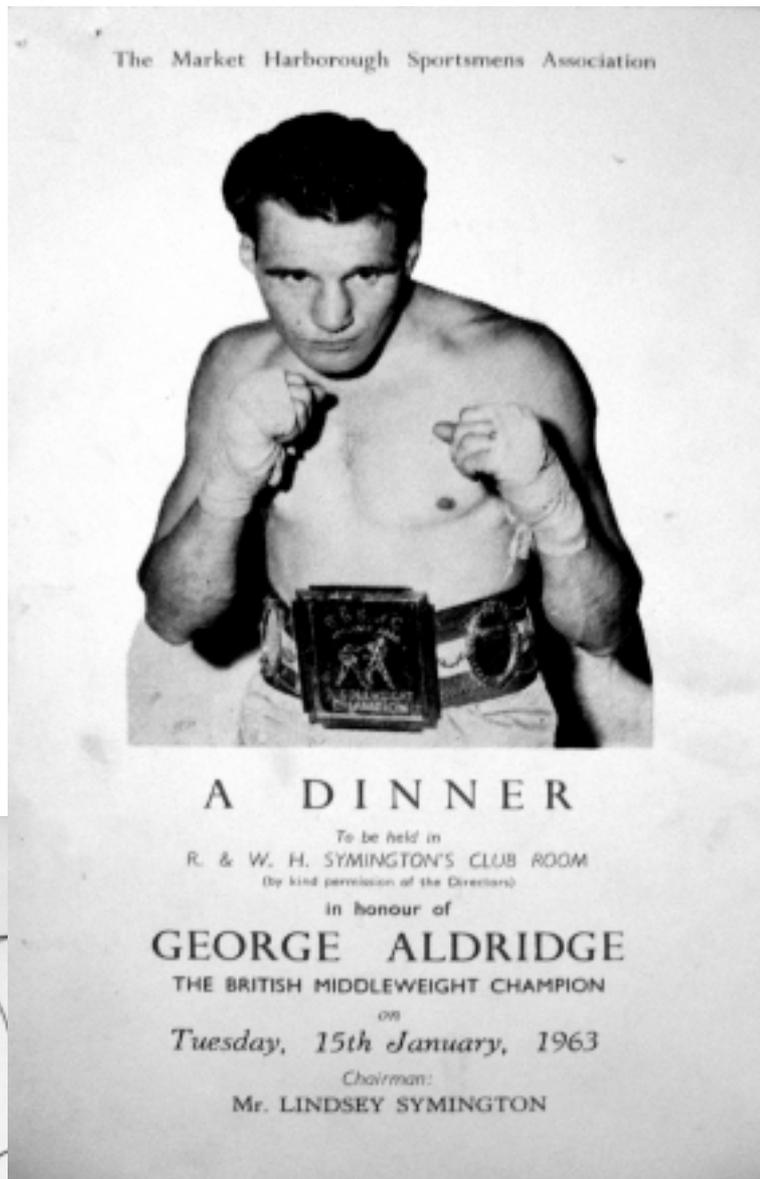
dating from the 1730s I referred to earlier were as legible as when they were written by the Steward's poor clerk. Granted, the ink had turned brown, but the paper was beautifully thick and firm, and the information conveyed fascinating.

Family trees, too, are likely to be more difficult to trace in future, with so many more informal relationships, and current census records being less reliable. Perhaps, on the whole, we are coming to the end of the golden age of documents available for historical research.

So, let us not lose records we can do something to help preserve. If all amateur historians spread the word, i.e. don't throw away any evidence about the past, even contemporary accounts which will be the history of the future, we may be helping people to do some research in centuries to come.

P.S. Among the studies I have been enabled to do, thanks to original documentation, are those on:

Education in Harborough, 1869-1914; a Kibworth Beauchamp corner shop, 1894-1910;



Public Health in Harborough, 1880s-1920s; and the Manor Courts of Great Bowden, late 18th and early 19th century.

TYPICAL OF EPHEMERA FOUND IN A SKIP AND HANDED INTO THE MUSEUM. THE EPHEMERA RELATES TO THE BOXER GEORGE ALDRIDGE. (LEICESTERSHIRE HERITAGE SERVICES)

Thanks to Harborough Parish records, already transcribed, I also studied the work of Harborough Parish Constables 1605-25, and Overseers of the Highways, late 17th and early 18th century.

I have every reason to be grateful to those who took care of early paperwork!